

## **A Day on the Hills**

*Twenty four hours; twenty four hours of sun, rain and wind; twenty four hours of gentle jogging, heart pounding uphill grinds and knee jarring descents; twenty four hours of smooth grassy slopes, rough scree and broken cliffs, twenty four hours of pleasure, perseverance and pain. So goes the Bob Graham, the ultimate mountain marathon in the UK. The statistics speak for themselves - 65 miles and 27,000 feet of ascent over 42 mountain tops, a route that encompasses the very best and worst of English Lakeland and all within that 24 hour time limit. A challenge indeed.*

Not being able to resist a challenge if it seems faintly possible that I might succeed, the Bob Graham seemed like a good objective, even for a mountaineer of modest ability such as myself. Having ascertained the route, I set to on my 'training programme', a series of long walk/runs at the weekend followed by complete seizure of my legs for the following five days. The lack of experience at completing these long distances was worrying and repeating the exercise didn't seem to be doing any good. In fact my test piece run ended in abject failure as a hastily arranged night run over the Helvellyn range ended with me hobbling down Fairfield propelled by walking poles which I had prudently packed in my sack. Thirty miles and I was a cripple - how was I going to cope with more than twice that and at a much faster pace?

Much faster runs round the Kentmere and Fairfield Horseshoes put paid to some of the doubts, but these were short affairs - no more than 13 miles. How I would cope with 72 miles of knee bashing was still undecided. Reconnoitring of the route was almost wholly on thick damp mist, and many times I lost my way in trying to push on at speed. The omens were not good, but with less than two weeks to go to my intended attempt I committed myself and engaged the services of Philip Gwilliam to accompany me the whole way round, and of my wife, Alison, Andy Elphinstone and Steve Roberts to help on the latter sections and at the road crossings.

And so the day of reckoning arrived. Having picked up a bug and having slept very little the night before I was not at my brightest as we hurriedly made our way to the Moot Hall in Keswick. Five minutes later than scheduled we sauntered down the main street on a close, overly warm morning. Despite the heat, the morning was fair and Philip's company lifted my usual plodding pace on the tarmac, so that we made good progress along the country lanes to Newlands. It felt good to be on the fells as we made the stiff pull up on to Robinson and as Philip struggled to keep with me on the ascent, my self confidence was given a welcome boost. On the climb up to Hindscarth Philip resumed his usual ascendancy, but the going seemed easy and we bounded down the slopes of Dale Head to arrive at Honister half an hour up on schedule. It was good to be able to run so free and easily after my travails during training runs.

To our relief, Alison and Andy were ready and waiting with tea, cake and other goodies. A deck chair at Honister seemed infinitely more appealing than the steep slope up Grey Knotts, so we rather reluctantly left our support for the toilsome ascent. This passed without event until midway up Green Gable, Philip suddenly stopped. He seemed to be in a bit of a daze so I asked him if he was okay, knowing that he suffers from epilepsy. His reply was not convincing so I sat him down, thinking that he might have an epileptic fit any minute. In the event, this did not come to pass, but he had clearly lost consciousness for a while and I felt that our attempt might be at an end. Not so. After being told where he was, Philip declared himself fit and ready to go. We proceeded as if nothing had happened and the incident had no further effect on the day.

More time was gained as we scrambled over Gable, ran the final scree down to Beck Head and slogged up Kirkfell. A stiff breeze had now developed, and although this was cooling it began to become a little wearing. On the ascent to Pillar we saw the first of the Bob Graham runners going the other way. The size of the support parties running with those attempting the Round made me feel quite vulnerable in our relative self reliance. My initial energy had by now worn off, but we were still making up time and moving well. Most encouragingly, we were gaining time without having to try too hard. The day was fine and I was enjoying the views that had eluded me on my reconnoitring expeditions.

The roller-coaster route to Steeple is a frustrating diversion, as you actually have to descend from the higher summit of Scoat Fell to reach the summit of Steeple. I find Bob Graham's choice of summits as arbitrary as the Munros, since he excludes definite tops which you have to go over such as Scoat Fell, yet he includes the featureless plateau of Watsons Dodd, a 'summit' which must rise no more than ten feet. Unlike the Munros however, there isn't the constant revision of the list and the original 1932 list remains inviolate.

With these thoughts cogitating, we continue an easy rhythm over Red Pike and along the superb contouring track to Yewbarrow. Then its straight down the screes and bracken to a welcome respite in the cool of the car park at Brackenclose. Cups of tea, soup and juice are thrust in to our hands as we interrupt the constant pattern of movement. My legs stiffen and I regret not being able to stop longer in the hazy sunshine. Alison and Andy dart about like tadpoles, whilst we eat in the same manner as we have been moving - with purpose and without time to appreciate the finer points of the food or our surroundings.

Scafell looms above and after 25 minutes we really can't put it off any longer. Somewhat stiff and lethargic, I steadily follow Philip up the steep and rather monotonous slope which stretches out almost three thousand feet up from the shores of Wastwater. Persistency pays off and we still manage to gain time. The drop off Broad Stand is the crux for Philip, but the dry rock is far more accommodating than the frictionless downward facing slabs with which I was faced just a week previously. The impasse almost seems friendly and relieves the monotony of Scafell's westward slopes.

On arrival on Scafell Pike, however, the weather takes a turn for the worse, as mist rolls in and a light drizzle falls from the clouds. By Ill Crag the drizzle has turned to rain. By Great End the rain is being driven along by a strong wind and Philip's light weight cagoule proves wholly inadequate, to the extent that I am soon cold, very wet and in poor spirits. Difficult route finding and wet rocks make for slow going, so we lose time, further contributing to sagging morale. Easier going over Esk Pike and Bowfell stops the slide in our momentum, but my careless error in route finding off Bowfell loses further time and saps my energy. Finding the route down Hanging Knotts is never easy, even in clear weather, and with treacherously wet rock and grass, the descent down the terraces was worryingly slow. The thick mist showed no signs of disappearing, even as we descended across the bog of Martcrag Moor, and although I was mentally prepared for this most tedious of sections, the clinging mist made it all the more tiresome. I was wet, cold and pretty miserable as we slogged through the black peat, aware of the fact that we were losing time and there wasn't much that I could do about it. The Moot Hall seemed a long way away.

A parting in the mists as we tackled the final come of Pike of Stickle seemed to lift my spirits a little, and the sight of Gimmer is always guaranteed to set the heart racing, giving a little extra spring to the step. So it proved on this occasion, although I could barely muster more than a gentle jog down the Pikes, with fatigue beginning to take hold. Thankfully the weather held over to Sergeant Man and High Raise and we could see the route unfolding over the undulating ground to Calf Crag and Steel Fell. Whether this was beneficial to me is debatable, as I suffered mental and physical torture on grinding out the route to Dunmail. I was still cold, felt constantly sick and was having trouble breathing as if I were at altitude. Every now and then I would suffer chronic indigestion and would have to stop to ease the pain of violent hiccups. This combined with an inability to swallow properly which contributed to the breathing problems. Suffice to say, I just had to tough it out and hope that the time gained would be enough to see me through.

Steve came to meet us as we descended through the deep bracken on the lower slopes of Steel Fell and his words of encouragement were a real tonic. Whether they were enough to see me through the night I doubted, but I didn't really care. I was at Dunmail and that meant warm clothing, a drink, food and what I really craved - rest. I must have looked a sorry sight slumped in the deck chair too tired to bother changing my sodden boots and socks, and unable to swallow more than a few mouthfuls of food. Geoff and Gaynor turned up in their van and it was good to get a bit more moral support. I still felt

wretched, sick and weak, but the moral support of having Steve to guide us through the night enabled me to get out of my chair and back on to the hill. The weather seemed to have improved too; the clouds were being blown away by the wind, although this developed in to a gale as we neared the summit of Seat Sandal. By some miracle I seemed to have gained a second wind and was able to move on comfortably to Fairfield and Dollywaggon before darkness fell. Philip meanwhile, had become separated from Steve and I, communication being impossible in the raging wind. His glasses had blown off in the gale and he was unable to find them in the dim twilight. I later matched this loss by mislaying my new Lowe Alpine cap which was stowed in my windshirt pocket, and which must have blown away in the dark without me noticing.

These mishaps aside, I was moving much better and we seemed to arrive at Helvellyn in good time. Tens of people surrounded the summit as they awaited the dawn on this, the longest day of the year. No time for us to hang around though, and the steady jog and walk over the long ridge to Clough Head just flowed on, with Steve setting a sensible pace and lifting my spirits just by his presence. I could sense that Steve knew how I felt. It was good to be able to concentrate on just getting myself round and not to have to navigate. The descent of Clough Head seemed steep, laborious and long and it was not until 50 minutes later that we finally pulled in to Threlkeld.

I was delighted to see Alison, Jeff and Gaynor as well as Andy at 2.30 am. Alison was equally delighted to see me in better shape than at Dunmail and excited that I might actually finish. I forced down as much drink as I could manage, but food was another matter. I still couldn't swallow - not even a paracetamol - so energy would have to come from within. As we made our way up the initial slopes of Blencathra, it became obvious that these inner energy levels were becoming dangerously low. My breathing was becoming increasingly difficult, the sickness was worse and I couldn't physically force my body on as I had been doing. Mind over matter was reaching its limits.

A damp mist hung over the summit of Halls Fell as we breasted the final slope. Not the dawn that the hundreds who had walked up Helvellyn would have wished to see. Andy led off from the summit and soon Philip and Andy were ahead of me. The slopes toward Great Calva stretched out inexorably as the others became dots in the distance. I knew that I was slowing but with no support could do nothing about it. I shuffled on in my own world, a world of lethargy, short, rapid breathing, queasiness and pain, all governed by determination and a will to finish, to overcome the desire to just sit down and go to sleep in the heather. I felt tearful and then angry, angry that I was left to my painful shuffling alone. But I couldn't be angry for long: I was too tired to feel anything for very long, and how could I be angry at what I have done to others many times in the past. Great Calva just sapped up everything I had: my feelings, my energy, my breath, my mind. It seemed as if the summit just floated away in the distance and I was walking up a down escalator of heather and bog, with just an awareness of time slipping away and the summit seeming to get no closer. However, the summit did get closer, albeit slowly, and we regrouped to descend toward Skiddaw.

A fruit pastille did seem to boost my morale although it must have had a negligible impact on my energy levels after nine hours without food. This helped me through some of the most intractable ground you are likely to find in the Lake District: knee deep heather and oozing bogs, with large holes to trap the unwary. Prior knowledge made me mentally prepared for this, and after the trials of Great Calva it didn't seem quite so awful as I had imagined. Fuelled by further fruit pastilles it was on in to the mist once more. Seemingly endless grass slopes stretched upwards but this was the last uphill and a fierce determination saw me up Skiddaw. Driving drizzle called for a hasty retreat from the summit, and as fast a jog as I could muster down the long slopes toward Keswick. The mist appeared to follow us down the hill and we only emerged from the all enveloping cloud near Lattrigg. Time was marching on and it was going to be close. The pace quickened as we contoured around Lattrigg, then down over the A66. Just as we were losing hope of getting to the Moot Hall on time, Steve appeared from nowhere, shouting a word of encouragement and then disappearing off with Philip to guide us across the park. The jog developed in to a run and finally a sprint as Alison urged us on at the Moot Hall. 23 hours and 57 minutes. We had done it! I feel quite emotional as I shake Steve by the hand. Without his help we might well have failed. What a finish. What a day.